

EFI Theological Commission

Webinar Series on Issues related to COVID-19

God's Providence and Human Agency

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Introduction

Most religions, if not all religions, believe that God created the universe and cares for his creation. Overall, we can identify three different ways God's providence is understood among people of faith. One is to stress God's plan and will for the World. It is God's will people say frequently recognising that God's providence is to fulfil his will for individuals, families, communities, society, nations and the whole creation. A christian would also acknowledge God's plan and will for his/her people, the people of God and pray for it to be fulfilled. Most times we tailor God's providence to individual or family life. This is our lived experience as people who believe in a God who cares for us. Secondly, in practice many people of faith live with a view that God created the world, watches over it but allows humans to get on with the world and only intervenes if he considers necessary and when we plead with him and invite him to do something. In practice our choices and actions make the world and run the world. Thirdly there is also a basic assumption in our Indian culture that human life and all life in the world is foreordained. It is fate, it is our Karma, it is written on our foreheads (in the stars for westerners), it is Kismet and mechanistic, following an inexorable law of cause and effect.

But our lived experience in the world continually raises questions about God's rule and care over his Creation. How can a world that God made and cares for have so much of suffering, unrestrained evil, greed, selfishness and foolishness? How can there be so much of uncertainty and helplessness as the present pandemic has revealed? These questions troubled the Church from the beginning. The early Church Fathers attempted to address this issue drawing on the Scriptures and also relating revealed truth to the thinking of philosophers of their times.

While drawing on the teachings of the church regarding God's providence of his creation, every generation of Christians must reflect on it themselves and arrive at insights and understandings that God's Spirit gives to us as we face new challenges.

Our world exhibited great confidence in human scientific ability and ingenuity to deal with every challenge that humanity and nature face in the past 50 years. This pandemic has shown human inadequacy and failure on a grand scale. The richest and the most advanced country in the world with 4% of the world's population has 25% of the world's Covid cases. Ed Young of the Atlantic Monthly writes that knowledge, transparency and decisiveness was required and were not there adequately and in time.

A. Thy will be done on earth as in heaven.

As Christians we recognise and appeal to God's providence as we say in the Lord's prayer "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven". We will explore briefly God's providential care and oversight of his creation and also the responsibility of human beings who God made in his image and gave responsibility to be stewards and overseers of his creation. I will attempt to understand the nature of God's providence by examining God's design and purposes for his creation and understand God's providence through the lens of the biblical understanding of God's relationship to the world he created.

1. The integral relationship of God to his creation is expressed throughout the Bible. In the Psalms we see majestic descriptions of God's relationship to his creation. In Psalm 19 we note the psalmist describes the heavens and earth God created (echoing Gen 1) as the handiwork of God that speaks his praise. It pours forth speech. Creation is a Book God has created for us to read. In the second part of Psalm 19 (Vrs.7-14), the psalmist turns to the Law, God's word, as the other book God has given us to read and know his precepts and commands. The psalm describes two books that God has given for us to understand his relationship to the

world both created by him. The Church Father Maximus the Confessor (7th century AD) developed a powerful theology of creation asserting that nature was also a book that will reveal God's relationship to the world. It should be read like the Bible for our understanding of God's care and providence of the world. It is well to remember that the book of creation is often as complex and mysterious as the revealed word of God given to us in the text of the Bible. Ask any philosopher of science, if science is always clear, plain and subject to reason. Psalm 104 sees creation as expressing the Wisdom of God. In the Old Testament wisdom is integrally related to God's creating activity. God created the world wisely, endowed it with abundance and gave it the capacity and ability to fulfil his purposes of order and fruitfulness. That is why in spite of its spoiling God will still establish a New Heaven and a New Earth. St. Augustine describes God as the supremely good creator and God's creation as having characteristics that are innately good so that life can flourish and please the creator. Even creatures that are dangerous to others are good in themselves. A Christian can continue to see God's creation as good inspite of the experiences of disasters, calamities and pandemics.

The New Testament continues this understanding of creation and links it to Christ himself. From the Gospel (John 1;1-3), to Pauls Epistles (1 Cor. 8:6, Col 1:15-20) and to Hebrews 1:2 Christ is described as the agent of creation. Through Christ God made the universe. The world came into being by Christ. All things came from Jesus and exist in him. Paul stresses that all things were the handiwork of Christ and made for Christ, Creation is for Christ.

As creation falls away from its creator, God chooses Christ to reconcile the whole of creation to himself. In Christ creation and redemption converge, so as Christians we can only properly view creation though the lens of the redeeming and reconciling work of Christ through his death and resurrection. As creation's creator and redeemer Christ sustains the world Paul writes.

In the midst of the violence, suffering and brokenness that we see in creation, Christians must still view it as held in Christ, sustained by his death and resurrection and moving towards the fulfilment to which it was created. God's relationship to creation is lifted to a new level when the creator Christ incarnates himself and becomes a creature in his creation.

In both the old and new testaments God's providence is particularly directed at the most vulnerable and helpless people: the widow and the orphan. It also covers the stranger. Here God's providence connects with God's justice and mercy. God's providence oversees this process till God's will on earth is done in the manner it is done in heaven.

2. Made in God's image.

God placed humans at the heart of his creation making them in his image. The image of God in human personhood endows humans with the responsibility and authority to oversee and steward God's creation.

Human dominion over God's creation became broken, spoiled and flawed. Human selfishness, disobedience and greed spoiled the "good" creation but God's providential action through Christ continues to strengthen and grow its capacity for goodness. All human communities are expected to create and contribute to the common good that will enable all in a society to be protected and all to flourish. I think it is right to connect God's providence with the presence and activity of the common good in a human society. God's providence enables common good and works through it, This is important for us who live in a plural society like India.

B. Human Agency

Most contemporary ways of relating to the world make human agency central. Due to its dominance in social theory for the past 70 years human agency is very significant in analysis of challenges we face in the world and in developing policies and strategies to produce the outcomes we plan.

1. Earlier human agency focussed on human autonomy. Such views are no longer widely held. For some time human agency was understood mechanistically as an instrument for human action. Today we have a much more biblically compatible view of human agency that stresses emergent human personhood that is self-reflective, organised, affective, self-regulating, proactive, personal and confessional.
2. That God is one in three persons is the foundation of a Christian understanding of God. Made in God's image humans are persons, different from mere creatures, beings capable of acting in freedom, for a purpose and to attain outcomes we plan. Human personhood emerges from the capacities God has endowed humans with and in interaction with the environment and with other persons.

God has endowed humans with capacities like power and ability to make decisions and bring changes in one's material surroundings and in one's thinking, ideas and views. Human personhood emerges with physical, mental and spiritual capacities.

Human capacities are causal capacities to experience, to feel, to understand and create. Humans are not passive objects but efficient cause of their own actions and interactions. Humans are created to anticipate and address futures.

Human capacity is also to discover and form our identity. In this identity formation we begin to find God's purpose for our lives, our particularity and our belonging.

“Human capacities endow humans as real casual agents capable of intentionally affecting outcomes in the world”

Biblical teaching recognises that God has endowed humans with agency. In Romans 1 Paul bases his argument for human guilt before God on the agency humans have been given. In 1:20 he concludes humans are without excuse. God has embedded and placed adequate knowledge of himself in creation. He has endowed humans with capacity to see and understand that knowledge and also with the freedom to choose to accept it or disregard it. In vrs. 21,23 Paul stresses human agency displayed in their choices and claims. Humans intentionally exchange truth for falsehood. They know but they do not believe and obey.

But Paul also relates human agency to the work of the Holy Spirit. In the climax of his argument in Romans chapter 8 vrs. 26-27 Paul writes that in the middle of our weak human agency that can easily be tempted and compromised the Holy Spirit works with our spirits.

We do not understand the complexities of the world we live in, we do not see all the forces that act on us. The Spirit gives us knowledge and the direction to pray. Jesus said to his disciples that the Holy Spirit will “teach you all things” John 14:26. A Christian understanding of human agency recognises that the Holy Spirit informs and shapes human action.

Earlier in Ch 8: vrs. 18-25 Paul identifies an abiding condition of human existence. It is marked by suffering. The whole of creation itself is subjected to frustration as it experiences decay rather than fulfilment and transformation. The creation grows in pain, frustration, suffering and longing for release and fulfilment.

It is here when human agency faces such overwhelming odds that the Holy Spirit comes alongside God’s children and joins their pain, their

groaning and enables hope to be borne, to find space and to grow and even flourish.

The Spirit opens the Christian to see the operation of God's providence. Providence is a state that the Christian can rest on but it is also an experience. The Spirit enables assurance of resting in God's providence and also enables the experience of confidence in God's activity to care and protect. Assurance is not complacency, nor confident pride but a humble response to the grace of God. A key theme in I John is the assurance that should mark a christian's life in this world. In Romans 14:8 Paul links christian assurance to our belonging to Christ.

Chapter 8 ends with Paul asserting in vrs. 28-37 human agency – “we are more than conquerors” integrally aligned with God's action – if God be for us.

Conclusion

How then shall we respond to our our current situation.

1. We acknowledge that this hurting and terrified creation is still one that Christ has made and is sustained in him. It has not slipped outside of Christ.
2. Christ's relationship to this Covid stricken world is still through his act of redemption and reconciliation. Even at this time we look for signs of his redeeming and reconciling activity.
3. We continue to praise God in the midst of all this. With the psalmist who acknowledges that he is downcast we also say “ By day the Lord directs his love at night his song is with me” Ps 42:8

4. We respond in humility and hope to every uncertainty and fear we face ,humility as our knowledge is inadequate and hope as we now we are held in Christ.

5. We continue to do all that call calls us to do particularly in relieving the suffering of the most vulnerable people in our communities and society.